10: Beaglehole E-5 (1934-5)1937 Pukapukans

EMOTIONAL RELEASE IN A POLYNESIAN COMMUNITY

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105 THE atoll of Pukapuka consists of three small islets strung on a coral ring. Apart from the tiny islet of Nassau, the nearest neighbor of Pukapuka is the Samoan Islands, some four hundred miles to the south. The total land area of the atoll [161] is less than one square mile. The population today numbers about five hundred people. In the past it was probably two or three times this number. For the most part, owing to the necessity of conserving food resources, all the people live on a small part of one islet only. The remainder of this islet and the other two islets are kept as food reserves visited only at times set by the controlling villages. The people are grouped into three villages, membership in which is by birth or by affiliation after birth.[1]

The year is roughly divided into two seasons. A season of fair weather with steady, cool, southeast trade winds lasts from March to November. From November on, the weather is marked by changeable and boisterous gales from the northwest. The average height of the land above sea level is about six feet. Hurricanes are infrequent, but when they do occur their effect is disastrous. Even without a hurricane, the time from November to March is one of ever-present anxiety and worry as to what the next day will bring forth. Since deep-sea fishing is difficult, this period is often marked by scarcity of both fish and plant foods.

105 The culture of the people is on the whole characterized by [152] extraverted tendencies. Times of birth, marriage and death are punctuated with violent outbursts of emotion that is allowed full 156 expression in chanting, dancing and wailing. In individual 181 behavior the society sets a premium on vigorous action whether in love, sport or everyday life. That man, or woman, is honored who shows exceptional excellence in any of these activities. The ideal is competitive to a degree. A man is happy if he can outstrip his fellows in love or sport and then boast of his exploits 156 in songs that he delights to chant. Naturally, for one to succeed, 578

[1] The social and economic organization of Pukapuka is described in *Formal Patterns of Pukapukan Culture*, by Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole, Bulletin in press, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii. [See 1: Beaglehole and Beaglehole-analyst]

[156 578] others must be defeated. Repressed jealousy and hard feeling are common emotions.

152 571 Under the conditions of life and the type of culture I have indicated it should not be surprising if repressed aggressive tendencies and anxieties show typical reaction formations. Life is such that no one may get away from his fellow-villager. Privacy and solitude as we know them are almost non-existent. Day and night, month in, month out, the individual is continually in contact with others. He cannot get away from them no matter what the provocation. Were it not for certain socially approved ways of expressing otherwise repressed emotions, the society would disintegrate under the weight of its own neuroses.

154 Two socially institutionalized releases for this pent-up emotion may be mentioned. When the old culture was functioning fully, the end of the hurricane season was celebrated with a month or more of dancing, chanting and feasting. The anxiety and worry of the previous months, during which there was an ever-present danger that each day would be the last, was allowed to drain away through a patterned emotional catharsis. Today when the island is nominally Christianized, the church has implicitly recognized the need for this purge. It celebrates a vigorous three-week period of thanksgiving and prayer, following this up with dramatic performances of Bible legend or approved incidents from the traditional history of the island in which village competes against village in a program of boisterous dramatization.

154 578 Another type of collective abreaction is found in the traditional institutional rivalry among the three villages. At periodical intervals contests are arranged in which village competes against village, the winning village being given the privilege of chanting for one whole day, in the presence of all the people of the island assembled, songs that glorify the chanters and hurl the most vicious insults at everyone else. At the end of a day, excitement reaches a high pitch and floods off into sexual license. Emotional catharsis and physical exhaustion thus combine to reduce the level of anxiety and aggression in the community to a socially safe pressure.

Village contests are arranged for fishing, wrestling, dart-throwing, and today for cricket. In this last sport teams of women compete as well as teams of men. The games continue for some three weeks and the women are at least as vigorous as the men in utilizing the opportunity given them to be as nasty and as insulting as they please towards the women of other villages.

As an example of the sort of chant that is considered insulting

10: Beaglehole E-5 (1934-5)1937 Pukapukans

when sung by the people of one village on one of these occasions of socialised release, I give the following translation of one of the briefest wrestling chants (but not one of the most brutally violent!): 154 578

> The kilts of Pana's women are easily opened—
> Pressed to the ground,
> Thrown by me
> Rolled over and over are the rival villages.
> Broken their hands and feet,
> Trodden and smashed their lips and eyes.
> Look from above, O two villages,
> On the strength you boasted of—
> Smashed it is and pressed to the ground—
> Come, come now, that I may take you
> On the journey of my human body,
> Landed at Yiva and Niue, sleeping there,
> Landed at Yiva and Niue, sleeping, embracing.

On the surface this may not seem to the reader to be particularly insulting. The import, however, is clear. The chant is sung by the people of Ngake village, whose other name is Pana. The implication of the first line is that although the women of this village are very hospitable (the kilt of coconut leaf was the only dress formerly worn by the women), nevertheless so defeated are the men of the other two villages that they have not the strength to take advantage of their opportunities—and no Pukapukan likes to realize this fact. Successive lines comment on the magnitude of the defeat inflicted on the two villages. The statements are extremely hyberbolic because Pukapukan wrestling is, on the whole, a very mild sport. Victory in a contest comes when a rival has both feet lifted from the ground, or touches the ground with any part of the anatomy other than the feet. The chanters, nevertheless, gain much satisfaction from exaggerated boasting. They are living for the moment in a world of make-believe, and the greater the fantasy the greater the success of the catharsis. The last four lines recur to the motif of sex: in fantasy, the Ngake men have taken the women of the other two villages away from their lovers, away to the two legendary lands of Niue and Yiva. There they may cohabit with the women free from possible interference from their beaten, weak and disorganized rivals. Thus in such a simple chant as the one adduced, the Pukapukan can work off banked emotion and receive therefrom the satisfactions of the most delightful fantasy.

10: Beaglehole E-5 (1934-5)1937 Pukapukans

154 578 The chant I have given is traditional. Many other chants are specially composed for this institutionalized insulting. After winning a victory in a fishing contest, for instance, the men and women of the victorious village will stay awake the night long, practising old and composing new and topical chants to be sung on the following day. No description can do justice, of course, to the chanting and the dancing that accompany it. The chanters, men and women both, are grouped in the middle of the village meeting ground, facing the people of the other two villages who have come to watch and be jeered at. Chanters are decorated with wreaths, belts and bandoliers of greenery. They chant continuously: the same chant may be repeated several times, and as soon as it is finished, another is commenced. All the time, the dance movements of arms and body accompany the rhythm of the song, illustrating sentiments in the song and pointing the insults with appropriate gesture. The whole picture is one of tremendous vitality, energy and excitement. I have no record of insult becoming so intolerable as to lead to physical violence. Everyone, whether actor or spectator, has been trained to the rules of the game. And formerly, at least, actors and spectators would be able to sink all bad feeling in the wildness of the sexual promiscuity that afforded a final outlet for emotional tension.

A somewhat different type of emotional release is afforded by the frequent telling of stories about the adventures and fate of man-eating demons who, after plaguing humans, are captured by culture-heroes and by them punished with a death that has many refinements of sadistic cruelty. These stories are told with great emphasis and realism, especially in those concluding sections where the type of death torture is elaborated. The evident pleasure of the narrator in detailing this torture, and of his audience in listening to it, contrasts strongly with the usually [156] gentle, friendly and peaceable character of the Pukapukans. It is only to be explained, I think, on the theory that a vicarious participation in such cruelty acts as an emotional release for aggressive tendencies, and that, in fact, the Pukapukan is normally gentle and friendly just because he has these necessary outlets.

Characteristic methods of killing a man-eating demon are: whipping the body with switches until the skin is flayed off; pounding the body with stones until it is reduced to pulp or dust; burning alive in a succession of fires. The following brief account of the death of one of these man-eating demons, a crab-like creature called Te Unga-tupua, is typical of many such accounts:

10: Beaglehole E-5 (1934-5)1937 Pukapukans

The people collected the rubbish piles and placed them in the customary path of the demon. A warrior showed himself and tempted the demon to advance. As he advanced, the warrior retreated, setting light to the piles with a torch. The translation then runs:

"The demon crab crawled on top of the first bonfire. He was scorched by the fire. One of his legs broke. Finished. Te Palo (the warrior) moved backward. The demon crab climbed onto the next bonfire. He broke the other large foot. The main legs were finished at being broken. Te Palo moved to the third of the bonfires. The demon crab also crawled up. They continued just like that. The legs were finished falling off in the bonfires, nine of them. There was still one more bonfire. The trunk of the crab's body and testicles alone remained. Te Palo moved backward. The crab crawled to the last bonfire. He burned the trunk and testicles. They fell away from the shell. The crab squirmed. Te Palo called out to his friends to come and help him finish off the demon. The people rushed forward with sticks and stones. They pounded on the crab, smashed him to pieces. They whipped him until his skin was raw. He was nothing but a soft pulp. They pounded the pulp till it was dust. The demon crab died. Finished also is his tale."

The account just given is in summary form, but it well preserves the narrative style of much of this type of Pukapukan fantasy—the repetitive and slow building up to a long-delayed climax. Told with gesture and enthusiasm, the story is made to live for the auditor. The European observer cannot but feel that the substitute satisfactions of fantasy should not be lightly underrated.

There can be no doubt that spontaneous abreactions of anxiety do actually occur in real life, more so in the past than now, when a Resident Agent keeps tight control on the manners, morals and customs of the Pukapukans. However, we were able to collect many accounts of incidents in which individuals were punished by spontaneous group action for crimes that particularly shocked the conscience of the time. The greatest sin in Pukapuka is, and was, that of stealing. This is understandable when one recalls that only by the most rigid control of all available food resources was it possible in the past to support the population of the atoll. Discovered stealing was a shameful crime. When this happened, the thief was likely to lose all self-control and, in his intense shame, kill whatever living creature was in sight. The following story of Vakathyala is a typical illustration of this:

Vakathyala went with the other people of his village to the reserve islet of Motu Ko to gather and husk fallen coconuts. All the people had been warned against taking drinking nuts for their own use. Vakathyala went

152 into the middle of the reserve, opened a drinking nut and afterwards
154 cracked the shell to eat the flesh inside. In the quietness of the bush this
627 was heard by the other men and they ran to him, seeking to hold him for
579 having broken the tapu of the reserve. Vakathyala escaped them and ran along the main reef back to his village. Near home, he came upon two children playing in a shallow reef pool. In his madness Vakathyala struck down the children and killed them. Rushing further, he came to two other children playing by themselves. These children Vakathyala also killed.

When the people of the island heard of these killings they were enraged. Vakathyala was caught and it was decided that he should be whipped to death. He was dragged to the village meeting ground and then in turn the men of each lineage whipped him. His skin swelled, became raw, was torn to shreds, only flesh remained, then his veins stood out, and soon his bones were visible. The father of the slain children heated stones red-hot and applied them to Vakathyala's testicles. When all the lineages had finished, the pulpy, disintegrated body of Vakathyala was dragged to the beach, thrown into the sea and allowed to drift back and forth as wind and tide carried it. The people gathered on the beach and cursed the dead body. One night Vakathyala's maternal lineage came secretly to the beach, gathered the remains of the body in a mat and buried it in a hastily dug hole. The people of the island looked for the body but none could find it. None knew its whereabouts. This is well for had the act of the maternal lineage been discovered, all the men of this lineage would have been whipped. The island had decreed death for Vakathyala and none might interfere with this command.

So runs the account. It should be noted that the last refinement of torture is not physical but social. The socially approved way in which to dispose of any corpse is to bury it in the family cemetery, the focus of a complex set of relationships which determine social status both during the life and after the death of
154 the individual. No Pukapukan can visualize with anything but intense horror the disposal of his corpse, or any other corpse for
761 that matter, in an unidentified grave or in the sea. It represents
152 the negation of everything that gives meaning to life. The real
579 point of the story, however, is the methodical manner in which the community systematically set about punishing the offender and in which it appears to have made this punishment the excuse for elaborate sadistic and aggressive impulses that would otherwise have been denied an approved outlet. Again, in telling the story, many many years after the event, informants became extremely excited as the narrative proceeded. With a wealth of
154 detail and emphasis they built up the climax. There was evident no expression of horror at the type of punishment inflicted, no statement of sympathy at the sufferings of the individual as he

writhed and groaned in his agony. There was a simple-minded participation in, and re-living of, the event in which so much repressed anxiety must have been allowed freely to dissipate itself over a helpless individual who had broken immemorial rules and become the moment's scapegoat. 154

Other examples of spontaneous abreactions are to be found in the infrequent bloody feuds that suddenly flared up in Pukapuka and just as quickly died down again. There was no institutionalized warfare nor any socially approved method of resorting to physical violence to settle disputes between groups. Occasionally, however, feuds broke out between the older men and the young men's group. The ostensible reason for these feuds was quarrelling over food divisions acerbated by the flouting of the authority of the old men by the young adults. Several of these feuds are well documented in Pukapuka. The noteworthy thing is the manner in which what might well be termed "blood lusts" for a time ruled the community. The stronger side hunted down and killed the opposing group without mercy and without shame. Familial feelings were ruthlessly tramped on, victims of the lust, in a typical case, forced to commit suicide by allowing friends to bury them alive in deep holes, the last consolations of custom denied them. Then when the last victim was safely killed, and anger and aggression appeased, the madness appears to have died down and the group lapsed back into the comfortable security of everyday life. 154 579 628

Violent individual reactions to anxiety conflicts may also be mentioned. Pukapukan patterns of sex behavior are noticeably Polynesian in their freedom. Adultery today hardly concerns the people except when an individual, more progressive than the rest, takes his troubles to the Resident Agent and this official is bound to interfere according to the civil code by which the island is now nominally governed. Formerly adultery was a private matter between the parties concerned. Whether an injured husband took note of the behavior of his wife depended upon his temperament, his affection for the woman, or the fact that he was goaded beyond endurance by interfering relatives. In any case, the usual result of noticed adultery was either the dismissal of the woman from the house or else a domestic beating. Occasionally, however, an individual seems to have been forced to more drastic measures, not by the flagrancy of the offense, but by intense anxiety in his own mind. The account of Kupenga illustrates this: 154 837 [691]

154 Kupenga was married to Te Anga. She committed adultery one day
and was spied on by the relatives of Te Anga, who came and complained
837 to him. The heart of Te Anga was pierced. He was filled by jealousy.
His jaws trembled, his feet stamped up and down. When Kupenga came
crawling back to him at daybreak he seized her, tore apart her thighs,
exposed her genitals. He tied her two arms to two house posts, stretched
apart her legs and tied them to two sides of the house. No part of her
remained covered. The news spread to the whole island. Nothing like that
had happened before and the island moved up to look at Kupenga. Te
Anga stood on guard before his wife, defying any man to come and untie
her. Because of his strength and skill with the club the crowd of men
were afraid. They cried out, beating their arms against their bodies, calling
for a person to untie the woman. It was impossible.

The people of the island and her relatives were ashamed because of
Kupenga. It was like any exposed object and the children were looking
on this thing. At last another strong man crawled on the ground to
Te Anga and beseeched him to soften his heart. By gentle words the
heart of Te Anga was softened. He ordered the men to untie his wife.
They did. So stiff were her muscles that she could not walk. Besides she
was ashamed of her nakedness. She strangled herself by tying an anchor
rope round her neck and pulling tight on the two ends. Kupenga died
and the island was disgusted.

This account has in it several touches of Pukapukan psychology, particularly that emphasis on the shame felt by a woman when her genitals are exposed to the gaze of others. Exposure of the genitals is the equivalent of sexual intercourse, and there are many incidents in Polynesia where a woman striving to preserve her body from a pursuer gives up the struggle as hopeless when by some ruse or other she is tricked into displaying her genitals. The shame of Kupenga was great because she was exposed not only to the gaze of all the men of the island but to the children as well, who, like all Polynesian children, are allowed to participate in almost anything that interests the adults.
152 The point, however, which I wish to emphasize is that Te Anga's
154 outburst of aggression towards his wife, an outburst so great
158 that he was strong enough to flout the feelings of the community at large, must be considered as a very individual way of reacting to a conflict situation which those of other temperaments would pass over with a momentary annoyance. It is also typical of the extraverted behavior patterns of Pukapukan society that his reaction should take the form of sudden and violent action. There was no brooding, no inner dwelling on a felt conflict, merely a senseless outburst of violence that drained off all the anxiety.
154 As long as the tension was at its height, Te Anga would brook no

interference with his plans. When it was lowered and he had returned to normal, there was no thought of continuing the torture of the woman he loved. 154

I have given the facts and have suggested that there is some necessity for explaining how the friendly, kind, sympathetic and generous Pukapukan comes to act in a way that is the reverse of all these qualities. It would seem that the function of such violent behavior, whether institutionalized, socially approved for the moment by a social group making new laws to fit the immediate situation, or individually patterned by a personality strong enough to defy opposition, is to provide an outlet for repressed aggression and anxiety that can find little satisfaction in the ordinary give and take of social life among a closely integrated group, extraverted in its culture patterns but forced to live a cooped life on a tiny coral atoll. Such tendencies being for the moment satisfied, the group can lapse back into more normal patterns of behavior and take up again, without undue strain, the petty annoyances and pleasures of everyday living. 578 154 182

The facts so far given refer to a Polynesian atoll, but behavior patterns similar to those described were not unknown among another Polynesian people, the Maori of New Zealand. The Maori tribe, the unit in which and for which the individual existed, was as circumscribed and isolated in its territory as any island group. Tribal ethics placed great value on group loyalty, solidarity, and cohesion. Yet because of individual aggressive tendencies the typical Maori tribe was a hotbed of petty jealousies, strifes and violent competitions between family groups over points of status and punctilios of honor. The major catharsis for an intolerable conflict between ideals of group loyalty and individual desires was inter-tribal warfare. A shamed or humiliated individual might sometimes provoke such warfare by deliberately and secretly going to the territory of another tribe and there just as deliberately killing all whom he could. Responsibility for the outrage would be assigned collectively to the tribe of the killer, and before the latter realized what was in the wind the avengers would sweep down, clamoring for blood and killing indiscriminately men, women and children. Thus outraged pride or dignity resulted in a type of aggressive behavior that could be satisfied only by the destruction of the members of one's own group. 171

In conclusion I would add that the material here given suggests further implications for social psychology. The observer who takes account of the relation of the individual to the group in those closely integrated units of the pre-literate peoples, is 121

10: Beaglehole E-5 (1934-5)1937 Pukapukans

121 likely to find clear and unmistakable the patterns of behavior which are sometimes more difficult to disentangle among advanced peoples. There is here a fruitful field for coöperation between the psychologist and the anthropologist. A realistic social or abnormal psychology must take account of the behavior of non-western peoples if its principles are to be adequately tested. The anthropologist, in turn, can gain a new insight into the meaning of customs, myths, and folk stories if he realizes that he is observing patterns of culture which may not be peculiar to one particular people, but illustrative of widely distributed types of behavior.